

Teaching English Language Learners

Strategies That Work, K-5

Katharine Davies Samway & Dorothy Taylor



New York • Toronto • London • Auckland • Sydney
Mexico City • New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires

Figure 4.1. Dr. Sam Micklus, founder Odyssey of the Mind.

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Sociocultural Issues

Often when we think about the needs of English language learners in our schools, we tend to focus on their linguistic needs. However, children do not come to us as clean slates ready for English language input. The social and cultural backgrounds of ELL students and their families greatly influence their school experiences, and schools must take sociocultural issues into account to successfully work with these children.

The learning styles of ELL students may be affected by their underlying assumptions about the nature of education, classrooms, and the authority of teachers. Students may be coming from cultures in which they were not expected (or allowed) to acquire significant levels of formal education. Students and their families may view schools as representatives of oppressive political regimes and may resist the well-intentioned efforts of teachers and school officials. Expectations about respect or personal demeanor may be highly variable, and assumptions about health and illness may sometimes differ from mainstream Western beliefs and practices.

Many students and their families may have come to the United States to escape war, oppression, or other hardships. Some have spent years in refugee camps, and many have suffered extraordinary traumas. Under such

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circumstances, the formal schooling of students and their families was interrupted or it may never have occurred. It is not unusual for political and tribal conflicts to carry over into classrooms and local communities in North America.

Regardless of how they arrived in this country, many ELL students and their families are dealing with economic hardships that affect the ways in which they participate in school. Students may be hungry; their clothes may not be new or of the current style; they may be lacking school supplies; and their parents and other family members may be working long hours and/or multiple jobs. The greater understanding teachers and schools have of these sociocultural issues, the better equipped they will be to achieve the goal of successfully educating ELL children.

Influence of Geopolitical Issues

In the past, immigrant students came to some school districts from well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, such as the first waves of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees in the early 1960s and 1970s respectively. In other cases, ELLs were the children of graduate students at local universities and they typically had been schooled in their native lands before coming to the U.S. Although middle-class immigrants continue to come to the U.S., now many more ELLs come from low-income homes. They have had little or no schooling due to a variety of factors, including economics (e.g., having to work to help support their families), geography (e.g., living in isolated areas that had very limited access to teachers), or war (e.g., leading to intermittent and interrupted schooling). In other cases, children who speak indigenous languages may have been schooled in a nonnative language, as often happens in countries such as Guatemala (where a majority of the population is of indigenous/Indian descent and speaks many different indigenous languages, including Mon). In these cases, it is common for teachers to arrive on a Monday and leave on a Friday, thereby further reducing the educational opportunities for local children.

Due to these socioeconomic factors, immigrants may enter U.S. schools with limited schooling in their native language. This factor alone—the level of education in the L1— plays a huge role in how long it takes to acculturate and acquire English language and literacy. Research shows that the more an ELL has been schooled in the L1, the greater the ease in acquiring English (e.g., Collier, 1989, 1992; Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 2001).



This is due, in part, to the way in which literacy skills and content knowledge transfer from the L1 to the L2. In addition, in many developing countries from which immigrants come, middle-class families have some familiarity with Western and U.S. culture through travel, the Internet, cable TV, movies, and print materials. In contrast, people from much humbler circumstances may have had very limited contact with English and Western customs; hence, they often need more time to adjust to a very different way of life.

General Strategies

Information is the key to being prepared to help newly arrived immigrant and refugee families. Local community support agencies, such as refugee resettlement agencies, can alert schools to anticipated arrivals of ELL families and provide culturally relevant information, including the educational backgrounds of arriving children. Once educators know which populations to expect in their schools, they can begin to gather information through the national resources listed on pages 14–16. Many immigrant and refugee families arrive with tremendous needs, and it is essential for schools to work with community agencies to coordinate efforts to meet the needs of these families. Patience, time, and a concerted consistent effort are the greatest means of support that teachers and schools can offer ELL children who have suffered traumas and had little or no schooling. Schools with large numbers or rapid rises in numbers of new immigrant and refugee families have found it useful to add some or all of the following staff members and programs:

- Parent liaisons, from the same ethnic backgrounds and language groups as the families, to provide a bridge between the school and the home
- Bilingual aides to support ELL students and classroom teachers
- ELL specialist support people to provide focused English Language Development (ELD) instruction
- After-school tutoring to provide one-on-one tutoring and homework assistance
- Volunteers to work one-on-one with ELLs on a regular basis
- Newcomer schools or classrooms to provide concentrated cultural orientation, ELD instruction, and sheltered content-area instruction, if it is not available in the L1

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- Advocacy, particularly with regard to funding and standardized testing—it often helps to have access to extra funds for specialized ELD staff and programs, including professional development. Also, it is important to have the resources to act as advocates on behalf of ELLs, for example, regarding high-stakes testing waivers or test accommodations.

SITUATION 1

Why is it taking my more recent immigrant and refugee students so much longer to complete

the English Language Development (ELD) program than the students I had a few years ago?

Targeted Strategy 1: Check into students' backgrounds.

How much formal education children have received in their native language will greatly affect how quickly they progress in schools in North America. In fact, a large-scale study by Thomas and Collier (2001) led the researchers to conclude, “The strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement.” Asking questions about ELL children’s backgrounds will allow teachers to accommodate the needs of these children and adjust expectations about how much time the students will need ELD support. Some questions that teachers will want to ask parents or agency support groups include the following:

- How much time did the child spend in school?
- Has the child’s schooling been interrupted?
- When was the last time the child attended school?
- Did the child study in the home language?
- Is there a written form of the home language? If so, are the parents literate in the home language (or another language)?
- What kinds of trauma may affect the child’s ability to concentrate?

Targeted Strategy 2: Teach students how to “do” school.

Students who have had little or no formal schooling are not just learning a new language; they are also adjusting to the academic culture of school. Sitting for long periods of time, using fine motor skills for writing with a pencil or cutting with scissors, using computers, asking permission to leave



the room, and raising their hands to speak are a few examples of aspects of school that may be new to them. While teachers should uphold clearly stated standards of behavior for all children, they also should be prepared to explicitly model and instruct children in school conduct and encourage the newcomers' peers to do so as well—peer buddies can be hugely helpful to newcomer ELLs.

Targeted Strategy 3: Contact community support organizations.

Community agencies and refugee resettlement groups can provide information about new groups of immigrants and refugees entering the community and may also have in place support services for families, such as helping with basic living needs, transportation, or after-school tutoring. If these services are not in place already, agencies can work collaboratively with schools to write grants and look for other ways to support these services.

Targeted Strategy 4: Enroll students in after-school programs.

Students who have had little or no education in their home countries often benefit greatly from after-school tutoring and homework assistance. Refugee resettlement agencies, community support groups, and schools can work together to secure the financial resources to support these programs.

SITUATION 2

Which countries, languages, and cultures are we likely to see in the next few years in our schools?

Targeted Strategy 1: Contact national organizations.

Information about national trends in immigration, refugee resettlement, and secondary migration within a specific country can be obtained from the following organizations, which can often provide information about where to find local organizations.

• *Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR)*

The center is housed at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), and offers orientation resources for refugee newcomers and service providers throughout the United States and overseas.

www.cal.org/co/



- *National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)*

NCELA is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). It is authorized to collect, analyze, synthesize, and disseminate information about language instruction, educational programs for limited English-proficient children, and related programs.

www.ncele.gwu.edu

- *U.S. Department of Homeland Security*

The department produces data and statistics on foreign nationals who have been granted permanent residence or are applying for asylum or refugee status.

www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics

- *Church World Service (CWS)*

CWS is the relief, development, and refugee assistance ministry of 35 Christian denominations (Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican) in the United States.

www.churchworldservice.org

- *Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM)*

EMM carries out a national program of refugee resettlement through a public/private partnership with the U.S. government.

www.ecusa.anglican.org/emm.htm

- *Catholic Charities USA*

One of the largest social service networks in the United States, Catholic Charities assists local agencies in refugee resettlement and provides networking opportunities, national advocacy, program development, training and technical assistance, and financial support.

www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

- *Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA)*

This organization is composed of more than 140 Jewish family and children's agencies and specialized Jewish human service agencies in the United States and Canada. Member agencies assist Jewish refugees and immigrants.

www.ajfca.org/facts.html

- *Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)*

CAL is a private, nonprofit organization working to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture.

www.cal.org/index.html